Meta Films Explores Music Alternate Video Markets

Record companies that produce music videos to promote record sales had a very narrow target to aim for when MTV was the only game in town. It was MTV or nothing. Although MTV still has a great deal of appeal, especially for record companies which are promoting Heavy Metal and Rock music, today many record companies and music video producers are setting their sights on much broader markets. Alternate vehicles for music videos include "Friday Night Video," "ABC Rocks," MTV's VH-1, video clubs, pools, and theatrical short releases, and some people, such as Michael Oblowitz, of New York City-based Meta Films, are vigorously pursuing these alternatives.

Oblowitz's music video roster includes artists such as Carly Simon, Janie Street, Shannon, Curtis Blow and most recently, Corey Hart. Because the music is more middle of the road or dance/rap oriented, the videos differ in content from that usually seen on MTV. There is generally less violence and misogyny—and more humor and "pretty" images.

Most of the music featured in Oblowitz's videos has sold well. His latest Corey Hart video, produced exclusively for MTV, placed third among the most widely played videos. When it went on to general release, Hart's "Boy in the Box" moved to number three in the U.S. and was one of the top 10 in 1985 in Canada. Shannon's "Do You Wanna Get Away" was on the *Billboard* top-40 singles chart, the top-10 Black chart, and was number one on the dance charts. This goes to prove that there is more than one way to sell a record.

Oblowitz shot "Boy in the Box" in London on Eastman color negative film 5247 for interiors and Eastman color high-speed negative film 5294 for exteriors. He changed film stocks in order to get two different feels—one for the post-nuclear environment and one for the futuristic Asian exterior. A large set, 40′ by 40′, was lit with big art lights to provide the nuclear

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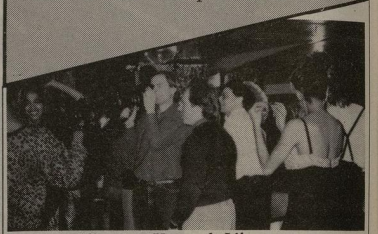
Howard Libov Shoots "Praying Mantis" and "Party Train."



Producer/director Howard Libov on location with Love Tractor.

Producer/director Howard Libov's two new music videos, "Praying Mantis" by Don Dixon and "Party Train" by Love Tractor, contain distinctive styles and an imaginative quality.

"Praying Mantis," which began airing on MTV just before the New Year, incorporates the process of Ultimatte which simulates blue-screen photography.

"The secret for using Ultimatte with 16mm film," says Libov, who produced and directed the project, "was proper and precise lighting. The resulting images have a clean, sharp look."

Libov incorporated stock footage of a praying mantis to accent the song's theme: a man being devoured by a love affair. The song represents singer Don Dixon's first record album, an Enigma Records release distributed by Capitol. Dixon, well known as a music producer, linked up with the filmmaker two years ago when Libov directed a clip for the band R.E.M.

Libov barely wrapped "Praying Mantis" when he hit the streets of Atlanta to direct the recently completed "Party Train" by Love Tractor. The album, a Big-Time Records release also slated for MTV, will be distributed by RCA.

"The old Gap Band Tune conjures up funky images," says Libov, a writer/producer/director whose documentary, "Building An American Tradition," is scheduled to air on PBS this spring.

"We shot entirely on location throughout the city of Atlanta and in its oldest and most noted black club, The Royal Peacock," reports Libov. "We filmed a series of street murals with a gritty neighborhood atmosphere, car scenes featuring the guys in Love Tractor taking in city sights, and staccato dance footage dramatically lit. We shot with 16mm film, super 8, black and white and color film," reproted Libov.

Howard Libov works out of New York (212-744-6514) and Atlanta (404-875-9587) through Howard Libov Productions. His credits include, "The Blues Live Here," a short profile of blues musician Son Thomas, and associate producer/writer/director for WTBS's premiere film, "Virginia," in the Portrait of America series.

Libov is currently developing television documentaries and feature films.

National Builds Strong Relationships With Music Video Prod. Cos.

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"pushes," jump cuts and match cuts to bring the group's fashion stance to life. According to Hengeveld, who became involved in the clips prior to the shoot, "these two videos offered the chance to use this technology creatively."

"In both cases," says Pantelich, "there was more of a give and take with the people there and a willingness to accommodate our needs. If we needed to do something a different way, or if we needed effects that weren't on the deck they were using, they were able to make a change."

It reminded me of the facilities I've worked with on the coast where there's all kinds of stuff happening around you in one place and where music video isn't an anomaly," says Soffer. "For me, it's a lot better working there than in an isolated environment."

Bell One's Perspective

"What initially impressed me about National," says director Jim Hershleder of Bell One Productions, "was the caliber of people in their film-to-tape room. When I met Bill Willig, National's colorist, the fact that he could talk to me about pictures as pictures, without resorting to a lot of technical jargon, made them stand out in my mind as special."

Hershleder's relationship with National had broadened to include on-line services by the time he made his directorial debut with "11th Confession," a clip for his high school friend Peter Himmelman, who was signed to Island in large measure because of it.

Of the period, Hershleder says, "They were very good to me at National at a time when I needed that. They didn't say, 'come back when you've made it,' and even now, I can say to Ostrow, 'I need an extra day on this,' and if he can, he'll give me a break."

It is indicative of the relationship between National and Bell One that in addition to working with Hershleder on subsequent videos for Rob Jungklas, Steve Earle, Lou Gramm, The System and Jessie Johnson, it was also Glenn Lazzaro who introduced Hershleder to Bell One's founder and executive producer, Karen Bellone.

Hershleder recalls, "I was there cutting a Jordache commercial and she was there 'on-lining' The Monkees' 'That Was Then, This Is Now.' I invited her to come and screen the Himmelman video and Glenn arranged for us to use one of the big on-line rooms so we could crank it up on those 'blow-your-mind' speakers. I guess it all worked because she loved the piece the first time she saw it and suggested that we ought to explore the possibility of working together on the basis of it."

For Lazzaro, it is Bell One's willingness to let him contribute that makes the relationship so strong. He says, "There are a lot of engineer types working as editors who don't have any cinematic training, don't have an artistic background and tend to be button pushers more than contributors to the process. These are the people directors tend to fear most. When people come to National, they know that the editors here can contribute. Typically, Jim will come to me with portions of a project uncut and he'll work with me to develop the rest. The result is that an atmosphere is set up where you want to give it your best."

Perhaps the best that can be said is that there is a good feeling that keeps music video production houses returning to National, and on the basis of these relationships, the facility has emerged as a leading contender in this field.

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landscape. Then, an alleyway in London was turned into a post-nuclear Chinese village. Corey Hart played a Harrison Ford-type character roaming the village in this eerie atmosphere.

Oblowitz, who still retains his native English accent, has lived in the U.S. for seven years. After an undergraduate degree in Fine Arts and Philosophy, he ended up at Columbia University pursuing a masters in filmmaking. While at Columbia, he hooked up with a small group of "underground" filmmakers, one of whom was Susan Seidelman, the director of "Desperately Seeking Susan." Oblowitz completed his own short black-and-white feature, "King Blank," which was shown in New York and received generally favorable critical acclaim.

It was "King Blank" that propelled him into the music video market via Jacob Brackman, a friend of Carly Simon. Brackman liked "King Blank," impressed in part by the production values Oblowitz created with a $50,000 budget. He figured that if Oblowitz could make a short film with that kind of money, he could do wonders with the same budget for a three-minute music video.

The first video that Oblowitz directed and photographed was Carly Simon's "Hello Big Man." It came in under budget, and Oblowitz's music video career was off to a good start. He has alternated between being a director and a director of photography, although he says that being a DP is not much different than being a director.

"I am so used to directing through the camera that I tend to do it even when I am technically just the DP," says Oblowitz.

The second Carly Simon piece he wrote, directed and photographed was "It Happens Everyday," produced by Music Motions for distribution as a theatrical short. It was not released on television.

The piece looks more like the opening to a romantic feature film than a music video. It opens in Munson's Diner in New York. The images are soft, diffused and bathed with a dreamy, colored light. Although he fre-

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quently used 16mm film for production, in this case, Oblowitz chose both Eastman color negative film 5247, a medium-speed 35mm emulsion, as well as Eastman color high-speed negative film 5294, a 35mm low-light-sensitive emulsion with an exposure index of 400.

"We wanted Carly to be dreamlike—sensationally beautiful," explains Oblowitz. "To achieve this effect, I used a large format (35mm) negative with a combination of fog and diffusion filters in tandem on the lens. Use of the low-light sensitive film in this situation allowed us to paint with light very sparingly, creating just the right look."

Another factor is the market. "It Happens Everyday" was designed for theatrical release. "We could have started with a 16mm negative and made a 35mm intermediate, or interpositive, from that," Oblowitz says, "however there woudn't have been any advantage."

"It Happens Every Day" was first released on the theatrical circuit in June 1984, and Oblowitz says that it played well. "I believe that the theater is going to become an increasingly important market for music videos," he says. "The main appeal of music videos is the production values—the creative use of lighting and cinematography. They look better on a large screen.

Music Motions has in fact released other videos that premiered on television for the theatrical market. Those that were post produced on videotape pose a slight problem. For film release, the post production video effects have to be edited out because once an image is originated on tape, the video grid remains part of the image.

"Whenever a video is planned for both television and theatrical release, it is much better to edit on film," says Oblowitz. "For a complicated piece it makes good economic sense to edit on film because you can spend more time cutting. A film editing machine rents for maybe $500 per week, whereas a video editing room can cost $500 per day."

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Oblowitz says he generally edits a film workprint. Then, he conforms the negative to the workprint with a computerized time code list. He used that list to cut the negative before transferring to tape.

While many video producers strive for a film look, Oblowitz says that his post production technique in many ways emulates a video effects look on film.

"I don't really like the look of video effects because they oscillate slightly," says Oblowitz. "They don't look integrated because they always have a seam in them somewhere, and that seam is usually jagged. This has become accepted as the style of music videos, along with the zealous use of wide-angle lenses."

To the less than scrutinizing eye, many of Oblowitz's film effects look like video effects. For example, in the Shannon video "Do You Wanna Get Away," a woman appears to float out of a television set, and a hand smashes through the set with glass flying everywhere. Both of these effects are prime candidates for ADO moves which Oblowitz initially had planned on. But with a $36,000 budget, he didn't have the money to create sophisticated video effects, so he had to figure out a way to get the look on film.

Oblowitz had the face of a television set without a screen on it held in a vice grip on two high-boy stands. The "leg" model laid on a dolly the same height as the screen. The dolly was wheeled through the screen with lights going all the way around the television set. For the second effect, he used super slow motion—150 frames per second—of the hand smashing through the television set. The final look is an "integrated" one.

This particular music video was originated on Eastman color negative film 7291, a medium-speed, 16mm emulsion with crisp sharpness and fine granularity. "If you light right, you can trim as much as 10 percent from your production budget (compared with 35mm film) and still get a great image for television," he says.

This can be a substantial savings considering the generally slim profit margins for most music videos. "It allows you to put your money into the talent, music and staging without sacrificing production values," he says.

Oblowitz likes to play with lights to achieve certain effects. He rarely uses a light without a colored gel. Even in the theatrical, dreamy Carly Simon piece he used a warm red-gelled rim light.

"I like to play with and alter the color temperature," he says. "I mix daylight and tungsten, and I mix blues and oranges."

The alternate music video channels are still new enough to be called experimental, and that holds a great deal of appeal for people like Oblowitz. "I think that music videos have to start incorporating more dramatic elements, more acting," he says. "They have tended to be more two-dimensional, like comic books. In my newer pieces I am trying to introduce dialogue and intensify the dramatic structure and the choreography in the form of the great musicals of the '50s.

"In the end, of course, it will be a counterpoint between what the record label wants and what the director knows will work as an interesting visual narrative and image."

Michael Merriman Shoots "Long" Line Of Love

Michael Martin Murphey recently released his newest country music video, "Long Line Of Love," and the second single from his recently released album "Americana" (Warner Bros. Records).

"Long Line Of Love," produced and co-written by Murphey, is a 16mm clip filmed last October on location in Palo Duro Canyon (Amarillo), Texas. The video casts several members of Murphey's own family tree and traces the story of a rural southwestern family through four generations of love. Concept footage is intercut with Murphey's live concert performance at the Pioneer Amphitheatre. Exterior footage was filmed in the Palo Duro Canyon with "period" footage filmed at the Pan Handle Plains Museum in an architecturally reconstructed turn-of-the century farmhouse.

The video was directed and co-written by Texas-based Michael Merriman, marking the first music video project for the director whose prior credits include television commercials and films for Western Merchandisers, Hastings Music Stores, Affiliated Foods, and several Texas regional financial and health care institutions.

Executive producers of "Long Line Of Love" are Sherman Halsey, recognized for his recent Dwight Yoakam clips, and Bob Burwell. Director of Photography was Dale Scarberry. Art director was Mary Murphey. Costumes were provided exclusively by Ralph Lauren Roughwear. Post production was completed at Dallas Post with editor Bryan Buongiorno.

Michael Martin Murphey sets up an outdoor shot with his wife Mary.

"Long Line Of Love" was written by the songwriting team of Tom Schyler and Paul Overstreet. The release of the song and video follows Murphey's current top ten hit single "Face In The Crowd," a duet with award-winning vocalist Holly Dunn. Both songs are included on Murphey's new album "Americana."

For more information contact Wendy Ferris Public Relations at (818) 506-1519. To obtain a review copy of "Long Line Of Love," contact Janis Azrack, Warner Bros. Records at (615) 320-7525.